

Retrieving Pompey's head: civil war in the *Aeneid*

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This is an article about Virgil's *Aeneid*, but we're going to start off on a beach in Egypt, which was the unlikely location for a turning-point in Roman history. In 48 B.C. civil war was raging between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great, and things were not going Pompey's way. Since Caesar had initiated hostilities in January 49 by crossing the Rubicon, Pompey had been driven out of Italy and then in August 48 comprehensively defeated at the Battle of Pharsalus in northern Greece. Pompey escaped to Egypt, only to be murdered on his arrival by supporters of the boy king Ptolemy XIII, brother and sworn enemy of (the famous) Cleopatra VII. According to surviving accounts, Pompey moored his ship offshore, but was lured by Ptolemy's acolytes into a rowing boat, on the understanding that he was being taken to meet the king. Once in the boat, though, Pompey was stabbed to death. Plutarch takes up the story:

When the people on the ship saw the murder, they gave such a cry that it could be heard from the shore. Then they hurriedly weighed anchor and took to flight. A strong wind helped them as they ran out to sea. The Egyptians, though wishing to pursue them, turned back but they cut off Pompey's head and threw the rest of his body naked out of the boat, leaving it there as a spectacle for those who desired to see such a sight.

When Caesar arrived in Egypt a short time later, Pompey's head was laid at his feet. But far from being delighted by the proof that his enemy was no more, Caesar recoiled in horror at the sight, and hunted down those responsible for the murder. His reaction may seem strange, but Pompey was a man for whom Caesar had a deep respect; and he had also been married to Caesar's daughter. That was the nature of the Roman Civil Wars. Your enemies were your friends and relatives, and victory brought shame and discomfiture rather than satisfaction and pride.

It wasn't only Caesar who was bothered by the mutilation of Pompey's body. It became for Romans in general one of those moments which stand for a whole era. The humiliation of Pompey, the most successful soldier and politician of his day (hence the nickname 'Great'), and that grisly severed head, seemed to encapsulate everything which Rome had suffered in the Civil Wars, a time the historian Tacitus described as 'twenty years of upheaval, no morality, no law: villainy never punished, decency often a cause of death.' Pliny the Elder shows how long the image of Pompey's head remained in the Roman imagination. Writing over a century after the event, he is describing a bust of Pompey made from pearls which was displayed at a triumph which Pompey celebrated whilst at the height of his success in 61 B.C. Pliny the Elder never misses an opportunity to moralize, often at tedious length, about Rome's decline and this pearl bust of Pompey is, as far as he is concerned, the last word in immoral extravagance, the kind of thing inferior creatures like Easterners and women might indulge in, but not a Roman hero like Pompey. But then Pliny feels a compulsion to connect the pearl bust of Pompey with that dreadful lasting image of his severed head:

This to be sure would have been a gross and foul disgrace, if it were not rather to be understood as a cruel omen of the wrath of the gods. That head, so manifestly without the

rest of the body in oriental splendour, bore a meaning which even then could not be mistaken.'

The present in the past

If Pompey's head was still a potent symbol a century later, it goes without saying that it was when Virgil was writing, less than thirty years after Pompey's death. The way Virgil brings the story of Pompey into the *Aeneid* will tell us a lot about his aims in the poem. Aeneas belongs to the very distant past, the aftermath of the Trojan War (which Virgil's contemporaries placed about 1200 B.C.), but Virgil is constantly encouraging his readers to draw parallels between the time of Aeneas and their own times. So while the *Aeneid* is not explicitly concerned with the contemporary Rome of Virgil, in subtle ways it does comment on recent events. And one way it does this, as we're about to see, is through an allusion to the decapitation of Pompey.

Book 2 of the *Aeneid* describes the last days of Troy, in the words of Aeneas himself, who is telling the story to Dido, queen of Carthage. Initially the Trojans are full of hope, believing that the Greeks have finally given up the siege and sailed away, and they are tricked into bringing the Wooden Horse, full of armed Greeks, into the city. Aeneas describes waking up after a night of festivities to discover that the enemy is within the walls, and fighting desperately to prevent the city falling. In the climax of the book, Aeneas climbs onto the roof of the palace and witnesses from there the slaughter of King Priam at the hands of the brutal young warrior Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. You may find some of the details of the death of Priam familiar:

*Even as he spoke, he dragged the old man, trembling,
and sliding in the pool of his son's blood, right to the altar;
Twined Priam's hair in his left hand,*

raised with his right the flashing

Sword, and sank it up to the hilt between his ribs.

Such was Priam's end, the close decreed by destiny-

*That in his dying hour he should see Troy blazing, falling-
His Troy which boasted once such a wealth of lands*

and subjects,

*The mistress of Asia once. A great trunk lies on the shore,
A head torn from the shoulders, a body without a name.*

Another decapitated body, lying on a beach in an Eastern country. Servius, the ancient commentator on Virgil, informs us that Virgil is here ‘alluding to the story of Pompey’, but Virgil’s first readers would not need to be told. What we need to ask, though, is why Virgil decides to assimilate a mythical figure like Priam and a contemporary figure like Pompey? What is the point of intermingling past and present in this way?

One answer is that it is an effective way of making the reader identify with the events in the poem. That subtle suggestion of Pompey's death will have given Virgil's account of the death of Priam much greater emotional impact that it would otherwise have had. The Sack of Troy might have been just another well-known, perfectly safe story from the very distant, probably mythical past. But the assimilation of the death of Priam to a

very traumatic recent event makes it something impossible to dismiss in this way. The Civil Wars were recent history, and the emotions they provoked still raw. It is some of that rawness and immediacy which Virgil is imparting by this strategy to the death of Priam.

Rethinking civil war

So it seems that when Troy is falling and Priam dying Virgil is encouraging his readers to reexperience the emotions of the Civil Wars. And this is far from the only point he tries this in the *Aeneid*. In the second half of the poem, for example, Virgil describes the war between the Latins and Trojans to decide which out of Aeneas and Turnus should marry the princess Lavinia and rule the land of Latium. Modern readers often assume that a Roman's response to this war would have been pretty straightforward: sympathy for Aeneas and the Trojans, and antipathy towards Turnus and the Latins. But it was much less clear-cut than that. We are repeatedly told in the *Aeneid* that once Aeneas had killed Turnus the two races would come together in harmony to create the Roman race, a *combination* of Trojans and Latins. So for Roman readers the war was between two sides of their own ancestry, and the emotions it provoked, once again, were the ambivalent emotions of civil war. There was no one clearly to support or clearly to condemn, no self-evident right or wrong, and their sympathy was with both sides simultaneously.

If the *Aeneid* is preoccupied with the recent Civil Wars, this is really no surprise. They were traumatic times, from which Rome had only very recently escaped when Virgil was writing the *Aeneid*. Out of these wars, furthermore, emerged the dominant figure of the emperor Augustus, and the anxieties Virgil's readers felt about the Civil Wars mingled with their feelings about Augustus. But Virgil is doing something rather more than simply ' chiming in ' with his readers' thoughts and anxieties. There's an argument discernible here, too: Virgil is trying to persuade his readers to think differently about the Civil Wars. The death of Priam is a ghastly event, and it encapsulates the horror of the fall of Troy as a whole. But in the *Aeneid* the Sack of Troy, terrible in itself, is what we might call a 'necessary evil'. If Troy had not fallen, Aeneas would not have had to escape, and the ultimate consequence would be that Rome would not have been founded, surely an inconceivable situation for any Roman reader. Perhaps Virgil is suggesting that something similar can be said about the Civil Wars which brought about Pompey's death and mutilation, and nearly brought Rome to its knees. They were ghastly, but they were necessary too, if the bright new Rome of the emperor Augustus was to be established.

A final thought. When Plutarch (and lots of other ancient authors) describe the death of Pompey in Egypt they all owe their information to one original source. This was a history of the Civil Wars written by C. Asinius Pollio. Pollio's history doesn't survive, but we know quite a lot about it. In particular, we know that Pollio's history was, unusually, a first-person account. Pollio had fought in the Civil Wars himself, and was present at many of the epoch-making events he recounted. It was Pollio, for example, who was on hand to record Caesar's famous remark as he crossed the Rubicon and plunged Rome into civil war: 'Let the die be cast.' So it is not just Priam who bears a striking resemblance to Pompey at this point of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas, too, giving his eye-witness account of the fall of Troy, looks a lot like Pollio telling the story of the Civil Wars from his first-hand perspective. Far from being a remote hero, Aeneas becomes a very familiar figure indeed, a survivor of the Civil Wars, a figure struggling to build a new life for himself and his people after the destruction of the old. This was a figure with whom Virgil's first readers, themselves only a decade or so beyond the Civil Wars, would have found it very easy indeed to sympathize.

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